

VISITOR SATISFACTION AND VISITOR UNDERSTANDING OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ACADIA NATIONAL PARK: 2000

Meeting the Requirements of the Government Performance and Results Act



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Abstract

In 2000, the National Park Service measured visitor satisfaction and visitor understanding of the significance of the park they were visiting through a brief visitor survey. Acadia National Park participated in this survey, which was intended to meet the requirements of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA).

In a brief report, the University of Idaho Cooperative Park Studies Unit presented the results of visitor evaluations of park facilities, services and recreation opportunities (GPRA goal IIa1) at Acadia. Ninety-six percent of visitors were satisfied with the overall quality of visitor facilities, services, and recreation opportunities offered by Acadia, an amount above the GPRA servicewide goal of 95%. Responses to questions about the quality of specific facilities or services showed there is room for limited improvement.

Visitor responses to the question about the significance of Acadia National Park (GPRA goal IIb1) were compared to significance statements identified in the park's GPRA plan. According to servicewide standards for evaluating answers to this question (visitor identification of at least one park significance item), 91% of Acadia visitors understand something about the significance of Acadia. This is well above the servicewide standard of 62%. Three quarters of visitors knew Acadia was significant for its scenery and one-third knew it was significant for its recreation opportunities. Compared with previous years, more visitors mentioned cultural heritage (15%) and natural resources (14) as significant to Acadia.

When given the opportunity to make other comments, visitors mentioned the need for improvements to restrooms, trail signing and maps, and enjoying the new Island Explorer bus service (fifteen comments). Six respondents specifically mentioned crowding or congestion as a problem.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2000, the National Park Service (NPS) measured visitor satisfaction at Acadia National Park and visitor understanding of the significance of Acadia National Park through a brief survey card administered to a representative sample of visitors. Satisfaction and understanding of significance had been identified as two important servicewide goals established by the NPS to satisfy the requirements of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA).

In this report, data from the Visitor Survey Card Data Report (see Appendix 1) prepared by the University of Idaho Cooperative Park Studies Unit will be reviewed briefly. The Idaho report presents the results of very general visitor evaluations of park facilities, services, and recreational opportunities. Here, we also present and analyze the results for the open-ended part of the survey card that asks visitors to tell why Acadia is significant and to give any other comments they wish.

METHODS

The University of Idaho established survey methods for all park units. At Acadia, four hundred survey cards were distributed on eight days between August 1 and August 31, at eight different locations (fifty cards for each). Distribution of cards was evenly divided between weekends and weekdays and two blocks of time, 8:00 a.m. to noon and 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. Locations, days, dates, and times are shown in Table 1.

We selected sampling sites mainly for their high visitation, but there were several other considerations. Because of the division of the park and Mount Desert Island into an east and west side, we chose five locations on the more heavily visited east side and two on the less visited west side. The eighth location was made up of both Blackwoods Campground on the east side and Seawall Campground on the west side. Twenty-five survey cards were distributed in each campground.

Three locations on the east side were high use frontcountry sites. The other two locations were high use backcountry trail and carriage road sites. The carriage road intersection selected was between the high and low use areas on the carriage road system (see Jacobi and Manning 1997). The trail junction selected represents moderately difficult to difficult trails with high use. One of the high use frontcountry sites on the east side, Jordan Pond, was selected because of the concession there and the multitude of activities available (hiking, biking, and boating). On the west side, Echo Lake Beach was selected because it is a high use frontcountry area. The primary activity there is visiting the beach and a secondary activity is hiking. Ship Harbor and Wonderland Trails were selected because they are easy trails and they represent the frontcountry users of the Rt. 102A corridor with its easily accessible park attractions.

Interviewers contacted visitors on a frequency of every third person or vehicle if more than 100 visitors were expected in the four hours, and every person or vehicle if less than 100 visitors were expected in the four hours (see Table 1).

Eight surveys were administered at Intersection 10 on the carriage roads on a Saturday because they could not be completed on Friday as planned. Four Friends of Acadia ridgerunners distributed the survey cards.

Table 1: Location, Day, and Time for 2000 GPRA Card Distribution.

Location	Day	Time	Freq.
Entrance Station	8/05/00, Saturday	9:30 – 12:00	3rd
Visitor Center	8/06/00, Sunday	8:00 – 12:00	3rd
Jordan Pond Area parking lots	8/09/00, Wednesday	1:00 – 5:00	every, then 3rd
Echo Lake Beach parking lot	8/10/00, Thursday	1:00 – 5:00	3rd
Beehive and Gorham Mountain	8/13/99, Sunday	1:00 – 4:00	every
Trail Junction			
Seawall and Blackwoods	8/15/00, Tuesday	8:00 – 12:00	3rd
Campgrounds			
Intersection 10 on the	8/18/00, Friday	1:00 – 5:00	3rd, every
carriage roads	8/19/00, Saturday	10:15-10:45	every
Ship Harbor and Wonderland	8/19/00, Saturday	8:00 – 12:00	every
Trailheads			

RESULTS

VISITOR SATISFACTION (GPRA GOAL IIA1)

The data presented in Visitor Survey Card Data Report from the University of Idaho report is mostly self-explanatory (see Appendix 1 for details). The most important result was that 96% of visitors were satisfied overall with the quality of appropriate facilities, services, and recreation opportunities. This is above the National Park Service 2000 GPRA goal of 95%. The response rate was 29% (114/400 survey cards). The data are accurate to plus or minus 6% with 95% confidence. This means that if different samples had been drawn, the results would have been similar (+/- 6%) 95 out of 100 times.

Visitor satisfaction with restroom facilities in the park had the lowest overall evaluation score (4.0 on a scale of 1 to 5) for the third year in a row. However, these evaluations are very general, and it is unclear whether visitors were evaluating the conditions of restrooms they used or the lack of restrooms in certain locations. A score of 4 out of 5 is still very good.

SIGNIFICANCE OF ACADIA (GPRA GOAL IIB1)

One of the open-ended survey questions asked, “What is the special significance of this park?” Visitors could respond by writing in as many items as they wished. Their answers were categorized according to a series of four significance statements prepared from the Acadia National Park GPRA plan (National Park Service 1997). We revised these significance statements slightly based on visitor responses in 1998. These significance statements were followed fairly rigorously. Exact wording was not necessary, but the concept had to be readily apparent from the visitor’s choice of words. This was not always obvious or easy, but most statements clearly fell into one category. If a statement contained one or more ideas that were different, both were used in the analysis.

1. **Outstanding scenery** – glaciated coastal and island landscape – mountains meet the sea – highest topography along the East coast of North America – Somes Sound the only fjord in the continental U.S. – preservation from development, especially the coastline – geology (as relates to topography) – tides.
2. **Recreation Opportunities** – many activities available – carriage roads, trails, hiking, biking, boating – scenic motor roads – park accessible to all users – public shoreline access – peace/quiet/solitude.
3. **Rich cultural heritage** – Native American history – French and British settlement – history of park formation, large land donations, visible proponents of conservation – historic hiking trails – historic carriage roads.
4. **Biological/Ecological (Natural) resources** – any mention of flora or fauna - exceptionally high biological diversity – presence of numerous rare species – unique mix of plant species that are at their northern and southern range limits – abundant wetlands – variety of habitats and communities.

We counted the number of surveys with any response related to significance, even if it was not included in our significance statements. Responses not related to significance were discarded from analysis. Of the responses related to significance, we then counted those matching at least one of the four significance statements. Ninety-one percent (86/94) of surveys with responses to this question had at least one match. Eight surveys had responses to the significance question but no match. The number and percentage of surveys with one, two, three, or four matches are shown in Table 2. Results from 1998 and 1999 are included for comparison.

Table 2: Percent of Responses Matching One, Two, Three, or Four Acadia Significance Statements*

Number of Matches	2000 (n=94)	1999 (n=126)	1998 (n=81)
At least one match	91	89	82
At least two matches	39	36	21
At least three matches	3	4	1
Four matches	0	<1	0

*The percentages in Table 2 do not add up to 100 because visitors could give multiple answers.

Three years of data consistently show that visitors most often recognize Acadia is significant for its scenery, followed by recognition of its recreation opportunities. Recognition of the park's rich cultural heritage and natural resources is much less common, although there was substantial improvement in 2000 compared with 1998 and 1999. Table 3 shows the details. Appendix 2 contains the verbatim significance responses.

Table 3: Percent of Responses With Specific Matches to Acadia Significance Statements for Scenery, Recreation Opportunities, Cultural Heritage, and Natural Resources*

Significance Statements	2000 (n=94)	1999 (n=112)	1998 (n=81)
Scenery	74	74	67
Recreation Opportunities	33	40	31
Cultural Heritage	15	9	3
Natural Resources	14	8	6

*The percentages in Table 3 do not add up to 100 because visitors could give multiple answers.

SUMMARY OF OTHER COMMENTS

Visitors provided many comments in the final section of the survey card. We established seven categories of comments as described below and grouped comments in the appropriate categories. Under each heading, visitor comments are reported verbatim. A semi-colon separates the comments of each individual. Fifteen people commented on the Island Explorer bus system, and most were very positive. There were six comments about crowding and congestion, eight about restrooms, and nine about trails.

Facilities and Maintenance

Provide soap in restrooms; the park maps at the trails need to clearly indicate "you are here." They are noted in the legend but not on map at least on the ten trails I hiked/biked; cairns were fun to follow, I also appreciated the blue painted blazes to follow; more picnic tables; bathrooms could be kept far cleaner despite the traffic – also simple outdoor showers at beach and lake areas could greatly enhance the comfort of the parks

visitors – even a few; Carriage Paths’ signs should always show Visitor’s Center direction; Sand Beach often messy – toilet paper strewn about; I believe the trails should continue to use blazes, rather than cairns. People are building their own and this creates problems for hikers; hiking trails and carriage roads are well maintained and apparently with the help of a well organized volunteer corps; trail to Beehive not well marked – tried to use map at base of mountain, couldn’t follow; I would like to see a better map of hiking trails, specifically a map that clearly marks the trails that are listed. The list of trails with distance and difficulty is great – but we couldn’t find the trails! Also more clearly marked trails (beginning and end); clean bathrooms; the trails were excellent, offering great views; biking carriage roads was awesome, maps @ post markers would be helpful, great way to experience the park with my 10 year old, thank you; put a cold shower in; trails are so well-marked; beautiful park, especially impressed with cleanliness and maintenance of even most heavily used areas; the new toilets at the parking lots are a terrific addition – keep adding them; quantity and quality of restrooms needs improvement particularly at top of Cadillac Mt.; carriage trail signs are a bit confusing, more numbers on the signs (like 8-20 arrow, or 11-10 arrow); at each trail junction, there should be a trail map w/all trails and highlights marked, with the trail distances indicated; a number of the trails do need some work, and more restroom facilities at the trailheads would help; restrooms were not very clean; excellent park staff and trail markings; facilities do not accommodate the numbers; more picnic facilities needed.

Concessions

Also the carriage rides are great; we were not really looking forward to our planning to eat at the Jordan Pond restaurant – but it was one of the best meals of our whole New England excursion; all excellent, wonderful to have Jordan Pond House in center – far above usual NPS concessioner quality; we had a great time at the park, my 6 year old daughter especially enjoyed the horse-drawn carriage ride.

Campgrounds

I feel that electric in the campgrounds would decrease or eliminate the use of generators and disposable batteries; please build more campgrounds with showers; fee for campground is steep when still expected to pay \$10 loop road entrance fee; the RV campers would like electric 1st water 2nd hookups – reservations at Seawall#31; all was terrific outside of campground facilities – hot water and showers (even if pay) would be an improvement; chose not to use park campsites as wanted showers, but respect your policy not to provide this facility; the grounds at each campsite in Blackwoods seems to flood – can the ground be elevated in the larger spots of ea. site?; showers in the campground please; Blackwoods bathrooms could be cleaner; restrooms poor @ campgrounds, need showers @ Blackwoods campground; assistance from park employees good except for campground employees.

Resource Management

Please make an even greater effort to educate visitors in proper treatment of the park and animals; the national park service continues to set national and international resource management standards, thank you so much.

General Impressions

Ranger Bob Rybolt lead a very informative program on the bridges; over the years, the park has learned to grow w/ the ever increasing number of people so I can still enjoy its beauty; first time here – never have we experienced such a beautiful place with so many rec. choices; for a national park it gives a small state park feel – (a good thing); Dappled sunlight shines/ pale green leaf on silver birch/ finest of God's work; the carriage roads are superb and the bridges are beautiful, what a resource; we had a wonderful time, this is our 12th trip to Acadia; as a year round resident I feel very fortunate to have ANP as my neighbor; very accessible and user friendly, can't help but relax; its beautiful; "close and cheap!" says the Maine resident, "loved the hikes and views" says Swiss resident; very satisfied, thank you; hope to have more time to enjoy the park another visit; it's a beautiful place to be; we had a great time; keep up the excellent work.

Congestion/Crowding/Visitor Experience

The park is well set up to offer activities that are non-commercial and bring us closer to the natural ecology; the Island Explorer shuttle bus is Excellent, this method of park access is the future; keep commercialization to a minimum, Bar Harbor has gotten out of hand (I know its not part of the official park); we used the free bus service often – routes and service excellent; we used the Island Explorer frequently, we love it, especially for planning longer one-way hikes/bike rides; no cars should be allowed; I think the buses are a good idea but will need to run more often to be widely used; life guard at Echo Lake beach should stop ball playing on beach; love the bus; too crowded in July-August, its time to start limiting numbers permitted in per day; wish the new buses ran more frequently; very difficult to find one's way around by car; propane buses wonderful for the environment; shuttle buses a good idea, too many people driving on loop roads; bus service is great; we loved the ranger programs the first time we visited, next time try to cut back on the rain; we loved the various hikes, the carriage roads for biking and echo lake beach for a late afternoon swim; the carriage trails were the best bike ride our family ever had; good traffic control, friendly employees; we enjoyed the carriage roads and the great ranger programs; need more free buses, more frequent scheduling and stops at Seawall campground; could use more bike paths on road, esp. between SWH and Seawall – buses are great addition; I believe parks should continue ranger programs and activities into the shoulder seasons (spring/fall); we appreciate the fact that the visitor's center's found and returned lost eye glasses; this was the nicest park I have ever been to – it was entirely accessible; make a guide avail for children friendly hikes, activities, I had to go through several books for the info; it would be helpful if trail maps indicated distances; we had a wonderful vacation, the bus service was excellent; the free buses are fantastic, we were in Acadia for 5 days and did not use

our car once; I have summered here (June-Oct) for over 10 years – more litter, more people not obeying rules; having been to several national parks I would rate this park as the best kept; maps of carriage paths should show elevation and topography; the bus system gets an A; rangers were excellent; not enough parking areas; overcrowded, no parking; we are concerned about the overcrowding – future plans?; the island bus is a great help – hope there'll be more offering quicker pickup to where you want to go; great and fun hiking trails.

Services Needed

More self-guided tours; boat rentals on the lakes would be nice; would like to see horseback riding available (rental horses @ the stable); open carriage roads to snowmobiles in winter; it seems a real “miss” not to have guided horseback rides and horse rentals inside the park.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2000 GPRA survey showed that Acadia National Park met the national goals for satisfaction (IIa1) and significance (IIb1). As with “significance” in 1998 and 1999, it is clear the park should focus on improving visitor understanding of our biological resources and rich cultural heritage. Visitors know Acadia is significant for its scenery and recreation opportunities. Inclusion of our mission statement in as many publications as possible and posting it prominently in public contact areas is one of many actions that may help with this.

REFERENCES

Jacobi, C. and R. Manning

- 1997 Applying the visitor experience resource protection process to Acadia National Park carriage roads: A summary of research and decision-making. Technical Report NPS/NESO-RNR/NRTR/98-5. December 1997. U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service. New England System Support Office. 23pp.

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- 1997 Strategic management plans: Acadia National Park, St. Croix Island International Historic Site, Maine Acadian Culture Project. U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service. 72pp.

Appendix 1: University of Idaho Survey Card Report

Appendix 2: Significance Comments

Unique natural splendor

Preserving an unspoiled coastal area of Maine, also preserving an area and buildings and carriage roads given to the nation for enjoyment

The natural beauty combined with a rich history of shipping and fishing industries in our nation

Because of its unique rugged, natural beauty – the waves crashing on its rocky shores

It's natural – unspoiled - beauty! The carriage roads are a real treasure!

An opportunity for families from all over to enjoy a minimally developed and beautiful spot in recreational activities appropriate for all ages

Beauty, peace, harmony, nature

Where mountains meet the ocean, crashing waves on rocky shores, beautiful vistas unlike any on the East Coast

Many people come from different states with one reason – to see the beauty and simplicity of nature. The park unites us together through this reason.

The park's beauty would be the most important significance to the nation.

Unique ecological formation

In 20 years since my last visit the park seems virtually unchanged in its significance! Its obvious Hudson River School influence for starters is significant – equally signif. it represents America's overall great fortune in its variety of natural beauty.

America's Beauty. Link to Centuries/Generations of Past

Brings great diversity – outdoor enjoyment to large population who treat it well. Trails always neat, respected.

It is needed to preserve open space. It is a place to get away and unwind from daily work pressures. We cannot pave over and develop our entire country.

It is nationally significant due to its unique shoreline with many species of animals/plants/aquatic life.

Accessibility to natural coast where the mountains meet the sea for the public is most significant and happens nowhere else on the east coast.

Coastal Maine beauty

An unusual coastline topped by mountain peaks. Also the numerous recreational activities available in a condensed space

The coastline and how it relates to the settling of the area

The park contains important geological and human history and offers the widest range of recreational activities in a manageable amount of space

History of the ice age – virgin shoreline for people to enjoy

Preservation of nature and wildlife

To preserve this beautiful island and all its natural resources (ANIMALS PLANT etc. in the sea and on land)

It is the most scenic spot on the East Coast. The combination of un-developed coastline and mountains with trails and carriage roads accessible to a large population is unique.

That everybody would enjoy the natural beauty of the park.

Viewing nature at its finest

It preserves unique beauty and recreational opportunities for current and future generations.

To give all Americans a chance to experience the beauty of coastal New England as it was before development.

It was wonderful to have the natural beauty preserved for future generations

One of the few East Coast parks – As beautiful as parks in the West – Better map of carriage trails

The Beauty of the coast and mountains

Access to all, to an area that would otherwise be available only to those of private means.

It is the only Nat'l Park in New England. Land for the park was given to the nation by philanthropists and it is being maintained by private donations.

Acadia displays magnificently the beauty of God's creation and it's importance to us as a nation.

Wildness on the eastern seaboard is crucial to the future. There is not nearly enough for the sanity of the people.

The way the glaciers formed Catalic Mountain.

Recreation, sight seeing

This is an outstanding example of coastal terrain with excellent views of the Atlantic Ocean. Maintaining public access is a wonderful gift.

Keeping this beautiful piece of land natural and unspoiled for everyone to enjoy in whatever way they choose to use it – hiking, biking, sight-seeing, etc.

To preserve the country's natural resources and save some areas from development and destruction.

This park not only affords people the opportunity to see nature but also to see the generosity of the people who donated money and time and land.

Scenic beauty

This park is one of our national landmarks. Its coastline is one of the "signatures" of our country.

Its for the enjoyment of individuals and to preserve the nature

Very beautiful Natural Features, Geologic and archeologic interest

It is an opportunity to see our nature as it originally was. Preserved.

Excellent hiking and open space in an area that is rapidly being consumed by wealth. It keeps the area accessible to all. A no-fee nat'l park!!

The park preserves and protects a magnificent piece of the country's natural beauty

Its richness of past history of an important era in the U.S. Combines natural beauty of ocean and mountains into one park. The carriage roads are very unique!

Gorgous scenery and the best of both forests and oceans

To preserve nature and to encourage respect of the natural beauty remaining to us.

Inasmuch as all national parks are significant to the nation because of the opportunities they provide visitors, this park's abundant beauty its most significant gift to those who visit.

Very important both as recreational facility and preservation of unique area much needed as antidote to commercial facilities

Beautiful, glorious natural places need to be available to all people regardless of income

The beautiful blend of rock, forest and coastline. The fact that it is not built-up and private like the rest of Maine's coastline.

Compared to others on East Coast, this park offers great scenic views and the combination of cliffs and oceans reminds one of Oregon

Incredible natural beauty, only national park in North East, symbol of New England, balance of ecosystems, helping endangered species.

Only National Park in NE – Provides flavor of beauty of Maine and rugged coast
Outstanding natural beauty not represented at other park units. History of conservation philanthropy.

The sense of geological and social history is important to remember. The slowing down of life is important.

Boundless beauty!

Peace and quiet if you want it

Preserving the natural beauty of New England's coastline.

It is the most beautiful U.S. natural resource east of the Mississippi.

To preserve the beauty for generations to come.

To preserve the natural heritage and beauty of one part of our nation and make it available for all to enjoy.

It so beautiful that being a park will preserve it for future generations

Visitors from China were impressed by the beauty and cleanliness of the park and the foresight to preserve such beauty

Opportunity to preserve forest land, teach people to appreciate beauty of our natural resources

The history going back to the Hudson Valley artists – more should be discussed about this. Also the geology of MDI is highly significant.

No other area of the nation can compare with the combining of mountains, ocean and freshwater ponds that Acadia offers. Great hiking, biking and boating

Often the coast is limited to those who are wealthy, this keeps a beautiful area accessible to everyone! Well done!

The unique island landscape, from rugged mountains w/breathtaking vistas to the crashing of waves on the rose granite shores. It must be preserved for future generations to behold and love. We met visitors from Holland just thrilled w/ the park and the wonderful hiking opportunities so different from their homeland. We were impressed with the minimal impact of the millions of visitors and realize that reflects the vigilance and care of the park's staff and volunteers. Thank you!

Only park entirely donated to country by private citizens, highest mountain on N.

American coast, most beautiful coastline in Eastern N. America

Preservation of nature

It is an excellent example of diverse natural life forms and geology of the Northeastern U.S. Also it is a sanctuary from the Megapolis that is the eastern seaboard.

This park allows Americans to explore the varied ecosystem of the Northeast and enjoy unrivaled recreation activities at the same time.

Beautiful seashores, mountains

Fantastic range of recreation/outdoor activities in exquisite setting. Suggestion – make carriage roads on private property accessible to bikes.

The scenic beauty of Maine's coast

Obviously, we are depleting our natural resources. Acadia is one of the few remaining gems left. I forgot how beautiful nature (somewhat untouched by man) is. We need to honor and respect this park!

Unique natural beauty. Only East Coast Fjord.

Preserves an important geographic area – beautiful to visit – I like the history, also
I think this park represents the beautiful diversity of our nation. The landscape is so
different from anything else on the east coast.

For everyone to be able to enjoy it.

It's just a wonderful treasure. We are very fortunate to have this wonder of nature in our
state.

Very important for tourism

The park is a precious jewel that I feel most visitors don't realize or appreciate – where
do they come from?

In my opinion the significance of Acadia National Park is extremely important.

Distinctive setting

A meeting place for all the different people, from all country to come together.

The N.P. system says much about what kind of people we truly are.